

Communicating with Indigenous Peoples: Lessons from Guyana



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[Photo: Ellen Hagerman and friends in Surama.]

Effective two-way communication is an essential component of development activities involving indigenous peoples, suggests a study on intercultural communications in Guyana.

"A lot of development experts assume the answer is to provide better technology, but the real focus should be on improving communication rather than on improving the tools," concluded [Ellen Hagerman](#), a recent graduate of the [Université du Québec à Montréal](#). In 1996, as part of her Masters thesis, Hagerman spent six months in Surama, an Amerindian village located in south central Guyana near the edge of the [Iwokrama International Rainforest](#). (Surama is about 90 minutes away from Georgetown by air and 24 hours by gravel road.) Her field work was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), under the former Young Canadian Researcher Award program.

Communication barriers

"I initially proposed looking at how communication flowed within the village, because the Iwokrama Programme is attempting to learn how to improve communications with Amerindian villages," she said. But the focus soon evolved into an exploration of communication barriers between the Amerindian villagers and "outsiders" — such as government officials, development workers, tourists, and even herself.

"From the perspective of their relationship with outside organizations, the villagers felt frustrated that people were constantly coming in and telling them: 'Here are your problems and here are the solutions,' without really taking the time to understand their situation," reported Hagerman. On one occasion, representatives of a government department and a UN agency arrived unannounced in Surama. "Along the road, they collected any of the villagers they could find." But they failed to include the village councillors — "both of whom were annoyed to discover that they had been left out of the meeting."

Hand pumps

Following introductions, the visitors asked: 'What are your water needs?' The Amerindians replied: 'We don't have any water problems.' Indeed, Hagerman told them that she had never been sick from the water. But after 15 minutes of "pretending to consult," they concluded that the villagers needed hand pumps from India, which the Government of Guyana would supply.

"Even when the school master indicated that the village had already had negative experiences with hand pumps, the representatives readily concluded that the villagers had surely not maintained them properly," she noted. "Thus, while one could argue that the officials did make some effort to pose questions to the villagers, they tended to react to responses with a 'we know better' patronizing attitude."

Academic jargon

On another occasion, representatives from Surama and neighbouring villages were invited to a public consultation on land use policy in Guyana organized by the government in partnership with the Atlanta-based Carter Centre. The consultation got off to a poor start when villagers received a 75-page document prior to the event. "The Amerindians were completely baffled by the text," said Hagerman. "Despite my own familiarity with the academic jargon, when asked to read through the document in order to provide some assistance to the villagers, it took me nearly two days to sift through the contents," she added.

The actual meeting was scheduled for 9 a.m. at a location 18 miles from Surama. "The majority of us had to leave very early in the morning to arrive on time," she reported. "Although many came on bicycles (most people had to double-ride someone), along the way we encountered a village captain from a neighbouring village who had left in the middle of the night since he had to walk to the meeting." Hagerman learned that on some previous occasions, "captains would paddle in for two days to get there on time and find out the meeting was cancelled." Not surprisingly, many villages view two-way radios as a communication priority.

Land use forum

During the land use forum, the speaker made a four hour presentation, discussing issues such as "the protocol for setting up ministries." Although he occasionally stopped to ask whether there were any questions, the Amerindians remained silent. "After he left, they admitted that they didn't have a clue what he had said." According to Hagerman, the level of language used at this event intimidated the villagers and reinforced their impression that "they are unable to participate. They fear: 'Well, we're not educated enough.' Yet if you ask them in a way they can understand and in an atmosphere they feel comfortable in, they will articulate their concerns."

"I really think there is a minimum of time that needs to be dedicated [to consultations]. Some of the Amerindians pointed out that for the amount of money that is spent to fly people in, if you're not going to do it right then don't bother coming," said Hagerman.

Recommendations

Among her findings, Hagerman recommends that government officials and development workers involved with indigenous communities make the occasional effort to stay with them, rather than at the nearest tourist facility. "When you do that, you are already establishing a communications barrier," she stressed. "Just being able to stay for a couple of days in a village means a tremendous amount to them."

Since her field work ended, Hagerman has briefed the Iwokrama team, which has responded positively to her research. "I felt that people were genuinely interested in making adjustments and in asking me for suggestions," she concluded.

John Eberlee is the Features Editor of Reports online. (Photo: E. Hagerman)

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